

Entrepreneur breathes life into game reserve

by Cheryl Mandy

GORONGOSA National Park in central Mozambique, a neglected game reserve which had most of its wildlife wiped out during a 30 year civil war, is being restored.

An American eco philanthropist Greg Carr has turned away from commerce to devote his energy into this project. He formed the non profit Carr Foundation and joined forces with the Mozambique government to re-establish the Gorongosa's vast savannas, wetlands and wildlife population, at the same time assisting with the development of surrounding communities.

In January 2008 a 20 year contract was signed between the two to co-manage the park and develop the ecosystem for the benefit of all. The Foundation has pledged to inject about \$40 million over the next 30 years. This will cover development of the park's infrastructure, the training of anti poaching teams (illegal hunting still continues within the 4,000 sq km park), the establishment of a biological research centre, reforestation schemes and improving the lives of local people by creating employment, funding schools and health clinics and training local farmers in sustainable agriculture.

Gorongosa once supported some of the densest wildlife populations in Africa. By the end of the war in 1992 its large mammal numbers were reduced by as much as 95 per cent - buffalo herds that once reached 14,000 were whittled down to just 50 - as refugees as well as members of the political parties of Frelimo and Renamo, which made their headquarters in the park, moved into the area and plundered it to survive.

"What I am doing is not that unusual. Many people have a desire to save our planet's precious eco treasures," Carr told *TIN*. He is indeed among the growing breed of entrepreneurs wanting to preserve African wildlife and help its people help themselves, with little interest in commercial gain.

There's Wall Street fund manager Paul Tudor Jones in the Serengeti in Tanzania, who together with South African Luke Bailes turned a badly poached area to the north west of the country into a haven for wildlife and a luxury safari destination providing



Gorongosa antelope; (below) Carr

employment for more than 600 people (Singita Grumeti Reserves).

Jones also has a philanthropic venture in Zimbabwe called Pamushana Lodge, where the 130,000 acre Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve has been stocked with wildlife and is a breeding sanctuary for endangered species such as the black rhino. At the same time the Malilangwe Trust feeds some 25,000 children every day.

In Kenya's Great Rift Valley a private home called Oldonyo Laro plays a large part in protecting Kenya's wildlife and helping the local communities. The 60,000 acre ranch is available for a few weeks a year by invitation of the Danish owner, Jan Bonde Nielsen. A family or a group of up to 16 can to rent the entire estate for \$250,000 a week, much of which goes back into the community.

Asked why he chose to revive this park in particular, Carr said that he wanted to find a project that combined human development with biodiversity preservation and restoration. "Gorongosa Park was once the economic engine of central Mozambique and I think it can be again some day. I know that it can once again be world famous. I can't imagine any other project that would offer such an opportunity to achieve something meaningful."

Another aspect of the project Carr finds fulfilling is it is being operated jointly with the Mozambicans. "I like working with the people of this country," he said. There are currently 250,000 people who live in the four administrative districts that make up the park boundaries.

What is unique about the greater Gorongosa region is that it contains five of the nine large biological regions in Africa. There is a rainforest on the 1,862m Mount Gorongosa that is listed by biologists to be in the highest category of conservation urgency, and in the park itself there is open woodland and grassland savanna.

"Heading east toward the ocean we have mangroves and flooded grassland. The region doesn't just support biological diversity. It also supports rare and beautiful landscape features and larger ecosystem processes that are important, such as 'ecosystem services' (the park cleans air and water) and the park supports animal migrations which are themselves unique to this ecosystem in their exact characteristics," he said.

Carr believed it would take about 20 years to restore the park to its former glory. "We need many animal populations to regain their numbers and we think that will happen

naturally. Births have been high in recent years. We also need a long time to develop a tourism industry and to train local Mozambicans for all of the park positions."

"We also need a long time to work with the traditional communities that surround the park on their aspirations for development. For instance, all of the communities need schools, health clinics, better farms and more water," he said.

The biggest challenge in

implementing the project had been hiring the right people. "But I am very happy to say that we have assembled a fabulous management team in every area of our initiative," Carr added.

Asked if he was looking for other investors to get involved in the project, he said, "We are creating relationships with other donors, such as USAID, the Portuguese government, Kellogg Foundation. We also hope that

tourism and commercial agriculture will empower the ecosystem to generate support for itself."

"We hope that we can attract some tourism operators from the Middle East," said Carr.

Tourism facilities are still only for the adventurous traveller, but future plans include the development of a luxurious tented camp to which tourists can fly into by private aircraft. Later in the year the park will be opening the tendering process for some luxury lodges within the camp, and there will be more concessions available for investors shortly.

The nearest airport is Beira some three hours drive away. Accommodation at present is at Chitengo Safari Camp in Gorongosa National Park in nine comfortable double cabanas, each with twin beds or one double bed. Currently these are being refurbished. All have mosquito netting, en suite toilets and air conditioning. Costs for a double cabana is \$108 (low season) and \$120 (high season).

By 2009 the park will have a conference centre that seats 75 people as well as a new restaurant and kitchen catering for 150 people. A bar and restaurant serving authentic Mozambican meals features locally grown organic produce on the menu. ■

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